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US To Boost Support For Cyber Dissidents

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By Matthew Lee

WASHINGTON – The United States stands with cyber dissidents and democracy activists from the Middle East to China and beyond, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said Tuesday. She pledged to expand the Obama administration's efforts to foil Internet repression in autocratic states.

In an impassioned speech on Internet freedom, Clinton said the administration would spend \$25 million this year on initiatives designed to protect bloggers and help them get around curbs like the Great Firewall of China, the gagging of social media sites in Iran, Cuba, Syria, Vietnam and Myanmar as well as Egypt's recent unsuccessful attempt to thwart anti-government protests by simply pulling the plug on online communication.

She also said the State Department, which last week launched Twitter feeds in Arabic and Farsi to connect with populations throughout the Arab world and Iran, would broaden the reach of its online mini-appeals for human rights and democracy by creating accounts cater to audiences in China, Russia and India in their native languages.

Clinton challenged authoritarian leaders and regimes to embrace online freedom and the demands of cyber dissidents or risk being toppled by tides of unrest, similar to what has happened in Egypt and Tunisia to longtime presidents Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

"History has shown us that repression often sows the seeds for revolution down the road," she said. "Those who clamp down on Internet freedom may be able to hold back the full impact of their people's yearnings for a while, but not forever."

"Leaders worldwide have a choice to make," Clinton said. "They can let the Internet in their countries flourish, and take the risk that the freedoms it enables will lead to a greater demand for political rights. Or they can constrict the Internet, choke the freedoms it naturally sustains, and risk losing all the economic and social benefits that come from a networked society."

"We believe that governments who have erected barriers to Internet freedom - whether they're technical filters or censorship regimes or attacks on those who exercise their rights to expression and assembly online — will eventually find themselves boxed in," she said. "They will face a dictator's dilemma, and will have

to choose between letting the walls fall or paying the price to keep them standing — which means both doubling down on a losing hand by resorting to greater oppression, and enduring the escalating opportunity cost of missing out on the ideas that have been blocked."

She said fighting restrictions would not be easy but stressed that the U.S. is committed to ensuring the Internet remains an open forum for discourse.

"While the rights we seek to protect are clear, the various ways that these rights are violated are increasingly complex," Clinton said.

The U.S. will "help people in oppressive Internet environments get around filters, stay one step ahead of the censors, the hackers and the thugs who beat them up or imprison them for what they say online," she said in the speech to students at The George Washington University. She countered criticism leveled at the administration for not investing in a single technological fix to overcome government controls, saying there was "no silver bullet" and "no app" to do that. Instead, she said, the U.S. would take a multi-pronged approach.

Clinton's remarks, her second major address on the topic of Internet freedom since becoming America's top diplomat, come amid a groundswell of protests around the Middle East that have been abetted by online agitators using social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to organize anti-government demonstrations from Algeria to Yemen, Syria, Iran and Jordan.

Despite the Obama administration's own problems with an unfettered Internet, most notably the release of hundreds of thousands of sensitive diplomatic documents by the WikiLeaks website, Clinton said the U.S. is unwavering in its commitment to cyber freedom, even as it seeks to prosecute online criminals and terrorists.

She drew a distinction between attempts to prosecute WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange for publishing the material along with the suspected leaker, and measures taken by repressive regimes to crack down on opponents.

"The WikiLeaks incident began with a theft just as if it had been executed by smuggling papers in a briefcase," she said. "The fact that Wikileaks used the Internet is not the reason we criticized it. Wikileaks does not challenge our commitment to Internet freedom."

Clinton argued that the Internet is neither good nor bad, a force for neither liberation nor repression. It is the sum of what its users make it, she says.